

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISLAMABAD 4349

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, ELAB, PK, SHUM
SUBJECT: THE MLA-PRESS CONFRONTATION: ANOTHER ROUND

REF: (A) ISLAMABAD 11954(77) (B) ISLAMABAD 11891 (77)

1. SUMMARY: THE LONG SIMMERING DISPUTE BETWEEN THE MARTIAL
LAW ADMINISTRATION (MLA) AND THE PRESS HAS BOILED OVER IN
THE LAHORE AREA IN RECENT DAYS WITH THE ARREST OF APPROXIMATELY
30 PRESS WORKERS AND THE EXTERMENT FROM PUNJAB OF SIX
JOURNALISTS. THE SPECIFIC CAUSE OF THE CONFRONTATION IS THE
JOURNALISTS' DEMAND TO RE-OPEN THE LAHORE EDITION OF THE PRO-
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PAKISTAN PEOPLES PARTY (PPP) MUSAWAAT, WHICH WAS CLOSED BY
THE MLA MARCH 22, BUT THE TUSSLE IS SYMPTOMATIC OF THE
ROCKY RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MLA AND THE PRESS, AND COULD
BECOME THE FOCAL POINT FOR FURTHER JOURNALISTIC DISCONTENT.
END SUMMARY.

2. THE LONG-SIMMERING DISPUTE BETWEEN THE MLA AND THE

PRESS, WHICH LED TO A STRIKE AND ARRESTS IN KARACHI LATE LAST YEAR (REFTELS), HAS AGAIN BOILED OVER, THIS TIME IN LAHORE. JOURNALISTS PROTESTING THE MARCH 22 CLOSURE OF THE LAHORE EDITION OF THE PRO-PPP URDU DAILY MUSAWAAT, TV(THE KARACHI EDITION CONTINUES TO PUBLISH) HAVE FOR SEVERAL DAYS BEEN GATHERING AT MUSAWAAT'S LAHORE OFFICE AND PROMOTING A HUNGER STRIKE. ABOUT 30 ARRESTS HAVE BEEN MADE, AND THE MLA HAS REVEALED A NEW TWIST IN PUNISHMENT BY EXTERN-ING SIX PERONS, INCLUDING MINHAJ BARN, PRESIDENT OF THE PAKISTAN FEDERAL UNION OF JOURNALISTS (PFUJ), FROM THE PUNJAB FOR UP TO TWO MONTHS.

3. THE LARGEST NUMBER OF ARRESTS OCCURRED APRIL 30, WHEN 22 PERSONS WERE TAKEN INTO CUSTODY IN LAHORE. SEVEN OF THE 22 WERE PARTICIPANTS IN THE REPORTED HUNGER STRIKE. MAY 3 PRESS REPORTS THAT FOUR MORE PERSONS HAVE BEEN ARRESTED; MANY OF THOSE ARRESTED WERE HELD SEVERAL HOURS OR OVERNIGHT AND THEN RELEASED. IN WHAT APPARENTLY BEGAN AS AN UNRELATED CONTRACT DISPUTE, A.T. CHAUDHRY, EDITOR OF THE PAKISTAN TIMES AND HAROON SAAD, EDITOR OF THE URDU DAILY IMROZE, WERE "RELIEVED OF DUTY" BY THE NATIONAL PRESS TRUST, MAY 2. PRESS REPORTS MAY 3 SAY HAROON HAS AGREED TO NEW TERMS AND IS NOW BACK AT WORK, BUT CHAUDHRY HAS BEEN TELLING PEOPLE IN LAHORE THAT HE WAS SACKED FOR PRINTING NEWS ABOUT THE STRIKE. ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THEIR SACKING WILL BE SEEN AS PART OF THE LARGER ISSUE AND
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STORIES OF THE SACKING WERE JUXTAPOSED IN MAY 3 PRESS WITH STORIES OF THE LAHORE ARRESTS.

4. COMMENT: TENSION BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND PRESS WORKERS AND THE MLA HAS BEEN A VARIABLE FEATURE OF POLITICS OVER THE PAST YEAR. THE PRESS, WHICH OBVIOUSLY REVELED IN THE RELATIVE FREEDOM THEY EXPERIENCED IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTER-MATH OF THE JULY 1977 COUP, HAVE CHAFFED UNDER CHIEF MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATOR (CMLA) ZIA'S BELATED EXHORTATIONS (BACKED BY THE FORCE OF MARTIAL LAW) TO PRINT "RESPONSIBLE NEWS" AND GET ON THE ANTI-BHUTTO BANDWAGON--ESPECIALLY SINCE THE CRACKDOWN ON POLITICAL ACTIVITY (AND CONSEQUENTLY ON POLITICAL REPORTING SINCE MARCH 1, 1978.

5. THE JOURNALISTS WERE ALSO NO DOUBT ENCOURAGED TO THINK THEY COULD ACHIEVE ANOTHER SUCCESS AFTER THE MLA'S EXTREMELY UNEVEN PERFORMANCE DURING THE LAST MAJOR CONFRONTATION, WHICH WAS ALSO OVER A PRO-PPP PRESS (REFTEL). EVEN THOUGH RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISTS HAD BEEN PRIVATELY CRITICAL OF THE BLATANTLY EMOTIONAL, EVEN INSURRECTIONIST, TONE OF THE LAHORE MUSAWAAT--AND THERE IS NO LOVE FOR

THE PPP JOURNAL AMONG MANY PRESSMEN--THE ISSUES RAISED
IN LAHORE, COMPOUNDED BY THE COINCIDENT SACKING OF TWO
OF PAKISTAN'S PROMINENT EDITORS, MAY WELL BROADEN TO
BECOME THE FOCAL POINT OF CURRENT JOURNALISTIC DISCONTENT
WITH THE RESTRAININTS ON PRESS FREEDOM IMPOSED SINCE MARCH 1.
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